

# First Steps

## NEWSLETTER

### Literacy into Therapy: The First Steps Provider

Karen Thatcher, Ed.D., CCC-SLP • Claudia McVicker, Ph.D. • Ball State University

As parents, educators, therapists and administrators, we all realize the importance of literacy in our everyday lives. Being literate is something that many of us take for granted and may not fully understand what being literate means or what becoming literate involves.

What is literacy? The conventional definition is being able to read, write and understand the world of language and text. This definition also includes the ability to use and understand oral language and is considered the "historical" viewpoint.

However, there is also another facet of literacy that must be considered, particularly for those children that are serviced through early intervention. This is an unconventional definition termed personal literacy (McVicker and Thatcher, 2005). Defined, personal literacy is attempting to read, write and understand at a personal developmental level. Additionally, the term personal literacy suggests that all children can benefit from being involved in print-related activities.

It is also critical to discuss that literacy does not begin to emerge when children enter formal schooling. Evidence-based research now shows that the birth-to-three developmental period is crucial to developing the foundation of literacy. In fact, examine the following:

- Skill development during preschool years strongly relates to later academic success.
- Levels of literacy and language at kindergarten and first grade predict school achievement and even the completion of high school.
- Special needs children are at high risk for later developing reading deficits.
- Many children—approximately 50%—with language delays develop a reading disability.

- Syntactic ability at 2 years of age predicts word reading ability at 5 years and at the end of second grade.
- It has been suggested that intervention implemented after children are 3 years old, especially for children in low-income households, may have limited impact on later cognitive or other developmental skills due to the cumulative effects of experiences during the first 3 years of life (Hart and Risley, 1995).

#### As a First Steps provider, what does this information mean to me and why should I care?

Early intervention service providers must utilize and adhere to the guidelines of developmentally appropriate practices. All areas of infant and toddler development are interrelated, including gross and fine motor, oral and written language, social, and cognitive skills. Evidence-based research dictates that if we are to make more meaningful connections across these developmental areas, we must make intervention more effective. We are also under close scrutiny to provide evidence that what we do in early intervention is working and is cost effective. The link to making intervention effective and FUN is literacy.

#### What role as a First Steps provider can I play in literacy?

Implications for practice include:

- Educating parents and other providers on the link between oral language and literacy.
- Educating ourselves on how to incorporate literacy into oral language, gross and fine motor and social activities.
- Providing literacy models for parents and caregivers.

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- Encouraging and assisting parents and other providers in accessing books and activities.
- Educating parents to advocate for their child's literacy development after leaving early intervention.
- Participating in emergent literacy research.
- Identifying children at risk for not developing literacy.

We all play a vital role in the development of the infants and children that we service. As providers, we not only affect a child's current development, we also have the ability to shape a child's future academic and social success. Incorporating literacy into therapy goals allows us as providers and parents to meet the developmental needs, abilities and interests of the children with special needs.

For more information or to make comments please, contact Dr. Karen Thatcher at [kthatcher@bsu.edu](mailto:kthatcher@bsu.edu).

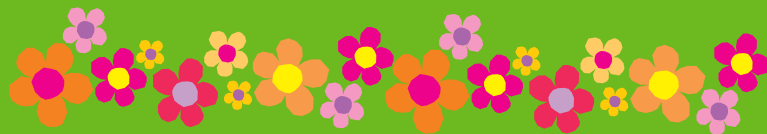
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## *This Newsletter's Mission*

The mission of this bimonthly publication is to offer useful information to families, providers, service coordinators, medical professionals, and others who have special interest in the successes and challenges of early intervention and early childhood development in Indiana and neighboring states.



## Welcome to First Steps' Newsletter

Welcome to the debut issue of the First Steps Newsletter. In conjunction with a more streamlined system of government, we are offering a simpler approach in keeping you informed and inspired with the happenings of Indiana First Steps.

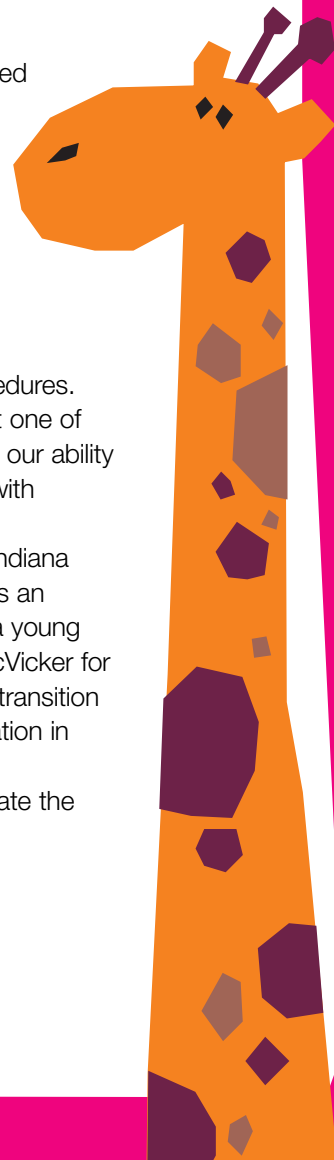
2005 is a year filled with challenge, change and opportunity for Indiana First Steps. Our new administration is making tough decisions and concerted efforts to improve and rebuild our state's internal systems and balances. On the front lines of First Steps, several proactive initiatives are improving our own system for helping Hoosier families and children with special needs. New approaches encourage greater participation and creativity from everyone involved in First Steps' success.

Along with change comes adjustment – a better way of approaching policies or enacting procedures. While this transition of structure may have many of us feeling concerned at first, rest assured that one of our most widely recognized strengths within the Indiana's First Steps Early Intervention System is our ability to embrace progress, initiate positive change, and secure the future of our families and children with special needs.

One exciting change from the National level is the emphasis placed on early literacy and how Indiana includes early literacy and support to families in our early intervention program. This issue features an introductory article to an extended research study on literacy and its importance and impact on a young child's development. Our thanks to Ball State University and Drs. Karen Thatcher and Claudia McVicker for their contribution. In addition, we encourage you to read the articles on early child development, transition and other early childhood related information as these issues continue to be an important foundation in which to build our success upon.

Together, we can continue to focus on the success of our early intervention system and celebrate the positive difference we are making in Indiana's future.

Dawn Downer  
Director, Indiana First Steps



# Guidelines on First Steps and LEA roles and responsibilities at the Transition Meeting

Mary Jo Paladino, Director of Indiana Transition Initiative for Young Children and Families

The Bureau of Child Development, First Steps and the Division of Exceptional Learners continue to strengthen collaborative efforts for children in transition from Part C to Part B services. "Guidelines on First Steps and LEA roles and responsibilities at the Transition Meeting" was created in response to issues raised by providers regarding the request for an initial educational evaluation and provider roles and responsibilities during the transition process. The guidelines were jointly signed by Dawn Downer, First Steps Director, Bureau of Child Development and Robert A. Marra, Assistant Superintendent, Indiana Department of Education and issued in a Memorandum to Cluster System Point of Entry Supervisors, Service Coordinators, Special Education Directors and Early Childhood Coordinators.



**Indiana's  
State Transition Initiative for  
Young Children and Families**

These guidelines review four areas:

1. Special education regulations guiding the initial educational evaluation during the child's transition from Part C to Part B.
2. Required participants at the Transition Meeting.
3. Considerations in scheduling the Transition Meeting.
4. Specific service coordinator and school representative roles regarding ways for obtaining written parental consent for the initial educational evaluation when the parent wishes to have the child evaluated for Part B services.

For a copy of the guidelines, go to Indiana Transition Initiative for Young Children and Families web site under "What's New":

[www.state.in.us/fssa/first\\_step/trans/index.html](http://www.state.in.us/fssa/first_step/trans/index.html)

## Turning 3 Transition

### Transition Meeting Requirements:

- All families in First Steps must have a Transition Meeting
- Transition Meetings are scheduled at least 90 days and up to six months before the child's third birthday at the discretion of all parties required to attend the Transition Meeting.
- The service coordinator schedules and facilitates the transition meeting.
- At a minimum, the service coordinator, family, and local school representative, with parent approval are required participants.
- The service coordinator obtains parent approval to share information before inviting participants and sending written notice of the Transition Meeting.
- Meeting arrangements must be made with, and written notice provided to, the family and other participants at least 10 days before the meeting date to ensure that they will be able to attend. Prior notice allows time for participants to prepare for the meeting.
- Service coordinators are required to use the state forms included in the "Transition Packet" to document notice of the meeting, the transition plan and meeting minutes. Forms available at: [www.state.in.us/fssa/first\\_step/trans/transforms.html](http://www.state.in.us/fssa/first_step/trans/transforms.html).

## TIPS for scheduling meetings:

- Be mindful of work schedules and calendars of families and providers.
- Call required participants before scheduling the meeting to check out possible times.
- Meetings should be conducted in settings and at times that are convenient to families.
- Consider a family's concerns, priorities and resources when determining location.
- Consider alternative ways to include participation when an invited participant cannot physically be present, i.e. telephone/conference call or by sending an informed, authorized representative.
- Build good working relationships with your partners. They'll be more likely to work with you to meet a deadline in a pinch.

## ALL ABOUT TRANSITION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

### A Learning Opportunity for Families

Indiana First Steps Family to Family is offering this training to parents of children with special needs who want to empower themselves with knowledge about the transition process and post-First Steps options. This training is lead by Family to Family staff who are parents. It is designed to give parents the knowledge and resources they need to make informed decisions for their

children. Topics include: definitions of transition, legislation, post-First Steps options in your community, timelines, the process, eligibility for special education services and IEPs. To find out more about how to schedule training in your community or where to find the next scheduled training, email Family to Family at [family2family@sbcglobal.net](mailto:family2family@sbcglobal.net) or call 1-800-396-7188.

**FAMILY TO FAMILY**  
Connecting Families in Community

# Cluster Corner

One year ago, First Steps System Coordination made a significant transition to 14 county clusters, providing a centralized SPOE for each cluster. Local Planning and Coordinating Councils representing the counties in their cluster work together to ensure a coordinated system of services for every eligible child in the state. To date, the new Cluster approach is successfully increasing the flexibility of resources in support of the needs of children and families.

Upcoming issues of First Steps Newsletter will feature a specific cluster along with a few ideas and insights about what's working in those counties—news you can use to improve the system of services in your own county! If your cluster has ideas on what should be included in future issues, please email us at this address: [FirstStepsWeb@fssa.state.in.us](mailto:FirstStepsWeb@fssa.state.in.us).

Here is a complete listing of the Clusters and their contacts. Watch for future features!

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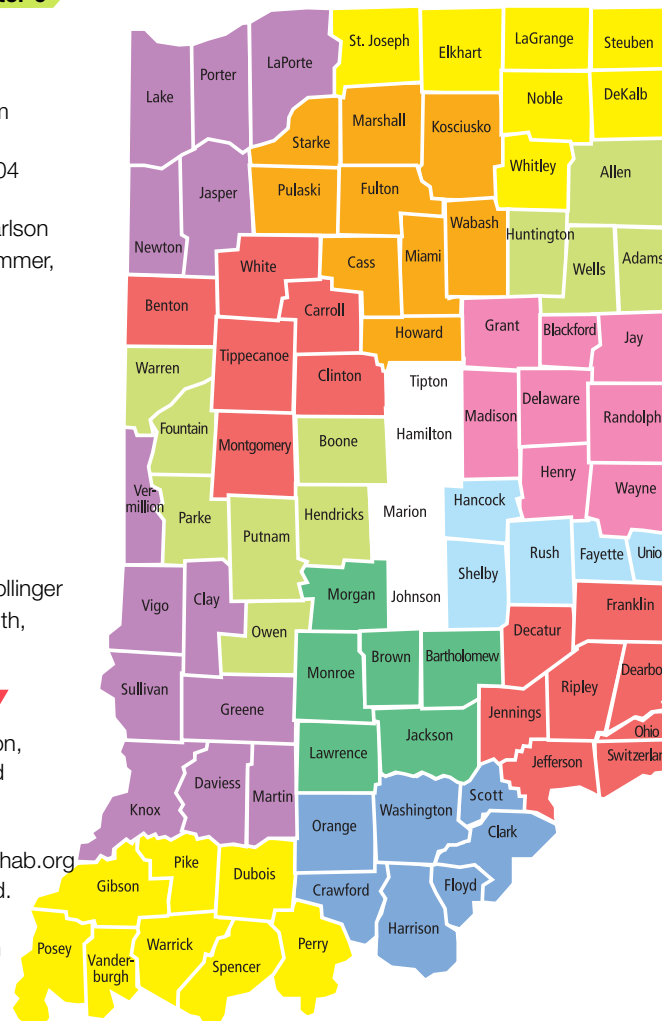
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## At last, new IDEA brings new hope

In December 2004, President Bush signed into law the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) celebrated the signing, noting that the new IDEA will do much to advance the educational success of children with disabilities as well as improve special education conditions.

CEC worked closely with members of Congress to ensure that the needs and requirements of students with disabilities are better understood and that their rights would be protected. At the same time, CEC advocated for changes in legislation that would assist special educators by improving special education teaching conditions and providing additional professional development.

"CEC is gratified that the new IDEA recognizes the great potential of children with disabilities and includes measures to ensure these students receive the highest quality teaching and instruction," comments CEC president Suzanne Martin.

Some of CEC's recommendations that have been incorporated into the new IDEA include:

- Ensuring students with disabilities are included in accountability systems.
- Reducing the burden of special education paperwork by deleting short-term objectives and benchmarks from IEPs (except for students who take alternate assessments), initiating a 15-state paperwork demonstration project, and piloting the three-year IEP.
- Establishing methods to reduce the number of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are inappropriately placed in special education.
- Ensuring that the discipline provisions for students with disabilities continues to protect the rights of these students to a free, appropriate public education.
- Providing funding for professional development for special educators.

As a result of CEC's advocacy on paperwork reduction, it is anticipated that the 15-state paperwork demonstration program will increase instructional time and streamline state and local requirements. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that necessary paperwork focuses on improved educational and functional results for children with disabilities while preserving civil rights and procedural safeguards.

Regarding early intervention services, the new bill authorizes local educational agencies to use up to 15 percent of IDEA funds for supportive services to help students not yet identified with disabilities but who require additional academic and behavioral supports to succeed in a general education environment.

"CEC commends Congress on developing this bipartisan bill that advances the education of students with disabilities," says Martin. "We anticipate seeing the results of its implementation in the future academic progress and success of students with disabilities."

The Council for Exceptional Children is the premiere association for special educators. CEC works to improve the educational success of individuals with disabilities and/or gifts and talents. The CEC's complete IDEA reauthorization summary can be found online at [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org).



*"Enhancing the choice of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with special needs and their families through community involvement."*

## We're IN Step With Families

The ICC was the recipient of a Parent Leadership grant in 2004 and a team of ICC parents developed a plan to build on the existing foundation of family involvement in our First Steps system. A series of family celebrations were planned in several communities around the state designed to:

- Provide networking opportunities for First Steps families
- Gather feedback from families for the ICC
- Connect families to local resources
- Identify more parent leaders
- Connect with underserved populations

Events have been held in South Bend and Evansville. Children were welcome and they enjoyed playtime as child care was available in an adjoining room. After having lunch with other families, parents were asked to join one of the small discussion groups led by parent leadership team members and answer a few questions about their First Steps experience. The goal of the gatherings is to get information from families about how to improve the First Steps system and take their experiences back to the state ICC. Lively conversations, great networking, and connections to local resources have been the highlights of these gatherings.



The ICC would like to thank all the families who support the First Steps system. We continue to work closely with FSSA, both as members of the ICC and through the newly formed Stakeholder group. One goal of the ICC is to ensure that Indiana's early intervention system remains a quality and family focused system for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities.

## Determining eligibility: the first step of First Steps

In 2003, Indiana First Steps initiated a network of Eligibility Determination (ED) teams to help evaluate and expedite each child's early intervention needs. A child's eligibility for First Steps Early Intervention services is determined by any of three levels:

- A biologically-related developmental delay
- Signs of being at risk for developmental delay
- Evidence of having a developmental delay

The process begins when the local First Steps System Point of Entry (SPOE) receives a referral for a child who has, or is suspected of having, a developmental delay or condition likely to result in a delay.

Determining the child's eligibility involves a comprehensive evaluation conducted by an ED team consisting of two or more physical, occupational, speech and/or developmental therapists. The evaluation identifies the child's level of development in five key areas: (1) cognitive, (2) physical, including vision and hearing, (3) communication, (4) social and emotional, and (5) adaptive/self-help skill development.

By design, the evaluation is conducted in the child's natural environment (home, child care center, or neighborhood playground, for example) and is family-directed to determine resources, priorities, and concerns that may enhance the child's development.

This approach allows the ED team to:

- Gain a more complete picture of the child's developmental status, including strengths of the child and family;
- Develop and implement an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) that will support the needs of the family and child;
- Provide quality measures to ensure that the IFSP fully includes all of the child's needs, not just the recommendations of an individual provider;
- Provide a network of ongoing service providers to receive feedback and support;
- Ensure accuracy and consistency in the child's improved development.

At this point, the ED team expands to include the family's service coordinator, service providers and family physician. The ED team stays in the background but is always available to participate in team meetings, decisions and reviews or changes in assistance.

For more information about eligibility or Indiana's ED teams, contact your local SPOE.



**First Steps**

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